

Day two

Already we were regretting that we were staying at Ulvik for only two full days; our instant feeling was one of calm contentment. The sun was shining and an early walk around the almost deserted village, with its views of fjord, wooded hills and distant mountains, was a tasty appetiser to a happy day.



Ulvik

We chose to head back to Bruravik and the ferry to Brimnes, followed by a drive 20 miles south-east to the Voringfossen with its 600ft vertical drop, reckoned to be Norway's 'most admired waterfall'. I'm not sure about the latter compliment though the fall is vertical, unlike the two seen on day one, and the sheer volume of water plummeting down is staggering, courtesy of many feeder lakes fed by glaciers to the north. Just as spectacular is the impressive climb from Eidfjord: the five-mile-long road, a mixture of hairpins, long tunnels (some with sharp bends themselves) and steep gradients, frequently crosses the old pack trail on the way up – the latter was in use just 100 years ago with its 1,500 steps and 125 bends.

At the summit of the 3,000ft climb, park your car and walk back down the 'old road' to get the best view of the Voringfossen, tucked away almost out of sight to the right. Other, longer walks, take you to the top of the fall.

We descended back to Eidfjord and continued south to Kinsarvik. Here we caught yet another fine, modern ferry to Utne, the home of the Hardanger Folk Museum, a short walk west from the car park at the ferry jetty.

The museum sits atop a small rocky knoll, above the fjord. A modern building exhibits a host of historical items, memorabilia and artefacts on the lives, both past and present, crafts and skills of folk from the terrain bordering the inner parts of Hardangerfjorden; all absorbing and interesting stuff. So is the collection

of wooden buildings dotted among the trees surrounding the main building; most of them date from the 18C-20C (there's one from the 13C) and are a varying range of homes – with old boathouses, school and shop too.

Don't leave Utne without visiting the wooden Utne Hotel, built in 1722 and the oldest hotel in the country open all year. Don't be shy; ask if you can have a look around. We also made a detour south-west to Jondal, past orchards and through woods, on an undulating road with fine extensive fjord views. Alas, time did not allow us to make the run east from Jondal to the Summerski Centre on the northern edge of the Folgefonna, with Norway's longest glacier ski run, 1,200 yards-long and a descent of over 250 yards.

We returned to Utne, used the ferry to Kvanndal and returned to Ulvik via Granvin and the 572 road to Ulvik. The 572 is an invigorating run and you'll probably have the road to yourself; a combination of snow-capped mountains, woods, meadows, lakes, streams and views which please the eye – especially those to both east and south as you descend over 1,000ft to Ulvik.

Total distance driven today about 100 miles.

Day three

One thing is certain; as you study the tourist material you collect on Norway's fjords, one tour is mentioned more than any other: 'Norway in a Nutshell' (NinaN). The excursion, available all year, can be started at Bergen, Oslo or Voss – and the roughly triangular run can be travelled either in a clockwise or anticlockwise direction. My suggestion is to do the journey in a clockwise direction, starting at Voss.

We left Ulvik at 8.30 a.m. and made the 25-mile run to Voss in less than an hour, using the 572 again and no less appealing as the evening before, and route 13. About midway a short, sharp climb rewarded us with a panoramic view of the two-stage Skjerrefoss waterfall, earlier bisected by the road itself.

A 10.00 a.m. start from Voss railway station (parking available) saw us on the first of the four different transport stages on the 'Nutshell' – a coach ride north-east to Gudvangen, at the head of one of Sognefjorden's many long, narrow arms, the Naeroyfjorden. Shortly before Gudvangen the coach made a short detour to the Stalheim Hotel, atop the renowned Stalheimskleiva, one of Northern Europe's steepest stretches of road.

Most traffic uses the new road which, with its over one-mile-long arc-shaped, descending tunnel, makes the 1,500ft drop into the valley below seem almost like child's play. At the hotel visitors are allowed to walk through the hotel (and past a large tourist shop!) to its terrace for the magnificent view of the valley far below (alas, two scenic thrills are 'hidden'). Following a 10-minute stop the coach driver used the 150-year-old road for the wooded descent; with 13 hairpins, a maximum gradient of 1 in 5, and an average width of about 12ft. The hidden 'thrills' are two waterfalls: Stalheimfoss comes first and is to your right; the second, Silvefoss,

after ten hairpins, is to the left. Part proof already that this is indeed 'NinaN'.

At Gudvangen we boarded a large ferry and left at 11.30 a.m. on part two for a two-hour extravaganza along two fjords where, for all but just a few miles at the end, no roads run along their almost vertical mountain sides.

Naeroyfjorden is long and narrow, cutting through a 6,000ft-high mountain wilderness, topped with glaciers and snowfields. The ferry stops, or better to say half stops, at two or three lonely hamlets, to drop off, throw-off is more appropriate, post and other daily essentials. At its narrowest the fjord is a mere 800ft wide.

Aurlandfjorden is wider and more gentle on the eyes, as both banks, though steep-sided, are covered with thick blankets of trees; note the isolated farms high up on the mountain sides. You'll not fail to note the 'Express' boat, a large catamaran, almost flying past on its journey from Bergen to Flam, passing the ferry at a staggering 38 knots-an-hour (44 m.p.h.).

At Flam we had an hour to spare; time to have a snack and drink and to explore a handful of touristy shops. Flam, the start of part three, is much the most exciting of the four different alternative 'transport' stages.

Flam Railway is a stunning 13-mile journey, starting at 2ft above sea-level and climbing to an altitude of 2,814ft. Almost 80% of the line has a gradient of 1 in 18 and there are 20 tunnels with a total length of nearly four miles. Seventy years ago the challenge facing the railway engineers was to build an all-the-year-round line where railcars (carriages), on 'normal' gauge tracks, make a journey which has the steepest gradient in the world. One answer was to incorporate five separate braking systems. To avoid avalanches the line crosses and re-crosses, many times, both the river and valley floor during the first eight miles of the journey.

So, on one hand, some man-made marvels; on the other a scenic journey with mighty fjords, rivers, high mountains, glorious woods, snowfields, glaciers, lakes and, of course, numerous waterfalls. Of the latter the most flamboyant is the Kjøfossen where a wooden platform 'stop' has been built literally in the middle of the enveloping mist and roaring cacophony of sound. At the stop look out for the sudden appearance of a lady in red at the cascade's side!

The 50-minute journey ends at Myrdal, a remote railway station which serves as the upper terminus of the Flam Railway and also a stop for The Bergen Railway, the latter opened in 1909 and chosen, in 1999, as one of the most beautiful in the world. At Myrdal you simply cross from one side of a platform to the other and await your reserved seats on a modern, high-tech express, initially traversing vast glistening snowfields, passing through tunnels, and then descending to the green woods east of Voss. We arrived back at Voss station at just after 4.30 p.m.

I feel the excursion, costing just under £40 per person in 2002, is worth every penny. 'Norway in a Nutshell' is an apt label. Don't miss the trip. (See the end of this article.)

Total distance driven today 45 miles.

Alternatives for a further one day at Ulvik.

Talk to Elfrid Hove at his Ulvik pensjonat. Borrow his bicycles for one of two possible cycle runs. First six miles to the east, to Osa, at the head of another arm of the Hardangerfjorden. When there see the 'Stream Nest', made from 3,000 logs and 23,000 bricks. A caveat: there's a hill climb both ways.

Alternatively ask him to take you in his estate car, plus bikes, first to the other side of Bruravik, and then to the end of the tunnel of the old road beside the fjord. From that point on the road will be deserted; if lady luck is smiling you may spot a seal, or two, in the fjord.

Call also at Ulvik's excellent tourist office with its so helpful staff. Pick up details of local walks, some of which start from the 572 road you've already driven over (to the west).

One further trip is to drive to Eidfjord and this time follow the road north-east, for eight miles, to Kjeasen, a protected mountain farm at a height of 2,000ft above the fjord. The last section is, indeed, that 2,000ft climb on a narrow road (including an over one-mile-long tunnel) to an eagle's nest viewpoint. Fellow guests at Ulvik made this trip and were enthralled by it.

They also explored the Hjolmodalen Valley south of Ovre Eidfjord, itself south of both Eidfjord and the lake separating them. Woods, waterfalls and solitude were their rewards.

Day four

Our plan today was for an easy run with the next overnight stay booked at Balestrand, on the banks of Sognefjorden, the world's longest. Sognefjorden has many 'arms' threading both north and south. We had seen two yesterday on the 'NinaN' trip; and, later on our motor tour, we would pass along the banks of the most eastern arm, the Lustrafjorden where, at its furthest tip, the village of Skjolden is 125 miles from the open sea. Balestrand is roughly halfway; and just west of the resort the fjord is a staggering 4,291ft deep!

The easy run was planned to allow us to see and enjoy, at leisure, two of Norway's 'stave' churches. I'll explain what these are. Found only in Norway, the unique 12C and 13C wooden churches once numbered many hundreds. The reformation, fire, wood rot, and sheer lack of care over the centuries, has seen their numbers dwindle to less than 30. Today the nation recognises its priceless legacy; the churches have been restored and cared for to such an extent that fire sprinklers now are a legal must.

The word *stave* means a post. The massive *staves* are superb columns of pine. Anything from four to fourteen or sixteen *staves* make a very strong frame on which further beams and planks are secured to make an extremely rigid rectangular structure. On top and to the sides further elaborate wooden exteriors are affixed; especially noteworthy are the wooden-tiled roofs with their distinctive 'tiles', not unlike fish scales.

Our first call was to Undredal, an isolated village of about 100 souls on the west bank of Aurlandsfjorden; we had passed the spot on the ‘NinaN’ tour. This time we accessed the village by road, via Voss, Stalheim and Gudvangen. In our own car we were able to stop often to admire and absorb the many differing landscapes – from emerald scenes and roaring rivers to barren slopes and, at one spot, on the drop to Undredal, indulge in a snowball fight.

Undredal is the home of Norway’s smallest *stave* church – only 40 worshippers can be seated because in this instance only four columns are in place. Simple furnishings and paintings were brought vividly to life by our guide, a young English-speaking village schoolgirl. Needless to say both the village and church were deserted; we were also able to enjoy an open-air snack at the café beside the landing jetty, relishing some of the very tasty white cheese made in the farms near Undredal.

We backtracked west to the junction of the E16 and route 13 and turned north, the start of the Vikafjell mountain road. From an emerald landscape we were soon in the midst of a 3,000ft-high treeless wilderness. This, the first of the four mountain passes we were to use, is the least exciting of the quartet – though I must admit, at the hairpin start of the long descent to Sognefjorden (a café on the right), the panorama far below and to the north of us was breathtaking. Vik nestled in a sheltered site in the middle distance; beyond was the fjord and, far to the north, lay high snow-capped mountains.

On the outskirts of Vik we made a short detour, to the right, to Hove church – a *steinkyrkje* (stone church) claimed to be part 12C and built in Romanesque style. The church was firmly shut. (Hove gave its name to Elvrid at the Ulvik *pensjonat*.) Far more significant was the turn off road 13 a bit further on towards Vik, leading to the famed and very photogenic 12C Hopperstad *stavkirke* (a 16 column church). Framed by copper beeches, the multi-sectioned roof, with dragons akin to the versions on the prows of Viking *drakkars*, was the first stunner. The apse and covered gallery were further intriguing features; as was the darkened interior with a notable Gothic altar canopy and some intricate wooden carvings. Hopperstad is a not-to-be-missed man-made must.

A large modern ferry took us across the Sognefjord, from Vangsnes to Dragsvik, via Hella, and left us with a short, picturesque drive to Balestrand, around a semi-circular bay with fields of an intense green above the waterline and a backdrop of high snow-capped mountains – the first



Hopperstad

we had encountered which were more akin to those seen in the Alps.

We had plenty of time to enjoy an evening walk from our fjord-side pension. First south to admire a handful of villas with individual wooden features. Next, in the opposite direction, to access the grounds of the large wooden Kviknes Hotel, a Swiss look-alike; we sat in front of the hotel, beside the fjord, and admired the extensive and handsome green-hued 125-year-old façade. The modern annexe, at the rear, used by coach package tours, is a Prince Charles carbuncle; how on earth did planners allow such a monstrosity to be built? One important Balestrand bonus: the village is bypassed by route 55.

Total distance driven today about 120 miles.

Midtnes Pensjonat 5850 Balestrand

(00 47 57 69 11 33 – fax 00 47 57 69 15 84 – www.midtnes.no/uk.utm – email: midtnes@online.no).

Set back about 50 yards from the water and with extensive views east of Sognefjorden. Some of the public areas are among the nicer features, especially the large sun-terrace. Cooking once again as basic as it can be. Oddly the owner, Jon Gjeraker, insisted on ‘cash’ on departure. Dinner, bed and breakfast: 1,020NOK for two people. Closed: October-April (check).

Day five

A grey, wet and overcast morning sent us on our way north; a depressing scene when compared with the lovely, clear, sunny evening which welcomed us to Balestrand the evening before. Initially our route ran north on road 13.

Beyond Dragsvik we caught sight of the start of the Fjaerlandsfjorden; until a decade ago the only means of accessing Fjaerland village, out of sight at the head of the fjord, was by ferry. More about that small village later.

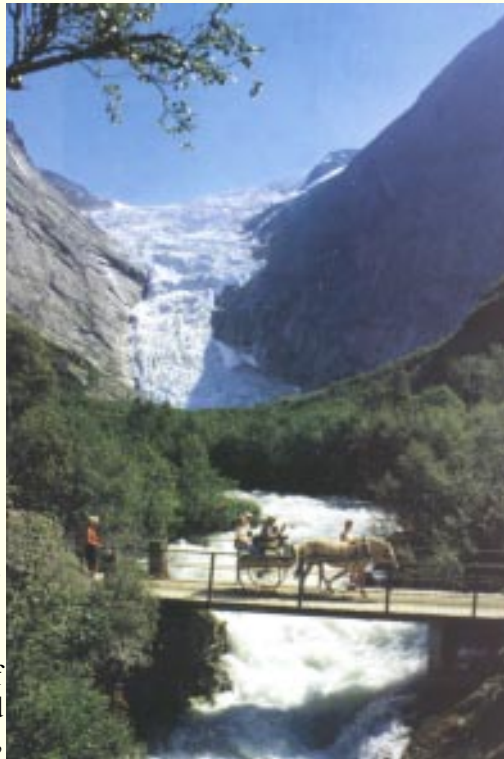
Soon road 13, tagged the Gaularfjell mountain road, winds its way through the wooded Barddal Valley and then climbs through wooded slopes, up a series of nine hairpins, to a large parking area just before the 2,444ft-high summit. Mountains hereabouts are Alpine-like peaks, rather than the rounded versions to the south. Look out, too, for your first glimpses of Europe’s largest glacier, the southern tips of the Jostedalsbreen (*breen* – glacier). You’ll see far more significant parts of this 300-square-mile gargantuan later on today’s drive (the glacier’s average height is 5,600ft above sea-level).

Beyond the summit, on a barren, snow-covered mountain top, the road descends into yet another different facet of Norway’s sparkling scenic gems: a *pays* of thundering rivers, waterfalls, myriad trees, rich pastures and attractive mountain aspects. Just east of Viksdalen, at Vallestad, is a small enclave which epitomises the natural landscape which I’ve described. Here the Vallestadfossen is, in reality, a foaming 100yds-long, 20yds-wide cascade; stop and admire the falls and do so again, a little later, at the top of the short climb beyond the river. From there the view west is perfection.

A long run, on the E39, leads you through Skei to Byrkjelo. Here road 60 climbs sharply northwards where, at the Karistova Hotel, you get your first view of Nordfjord, the third of the three major versions in Norway's 'Fjordland'. The weather was dull so I tried hard to picture what the terrain would look like in bright sun. The brightest spots were the numerous homes and farms, all apparently finished with the same maroon paint brush. Just our bad luck that we couldn't see the distant mountain peaks. Photographs depict them, once again, to be of the real 'peaked' variety.

However, at Olden, we turned south into what was, even in the gloom of a dark grey day, the start of a fantastic afternoon's adventure. As we passed first a small lake to our right, then a larger version, we caught tantalising views of glacier edges high above us, to both sides of the valley. Then, when we crossed a stream and drove alongside a much larger jade-green lake to our left, we saw the mighty Melkevollsreen to the far south. My initial reaction, after we parked at a large picnic area, was that this must be the world-famous Briksdal glacier; but I had earlier gleaned from a tourist brochure that this *reen* was tucked away to the left, hidden from view. How strange that Michelin makes no mention of the Melkevollsreen version at all! (Indeed, Bibendum compounds the problem by suggesting in the green guide that the first full glacier view you see to the south, as I described above, is Briksdalsreen. They are wrong; unusual for them.)

At Briksdal, a motley collection of buildings (including a cafeteria and souvenir shop) 15 miles from Olden, you have to park in designated (dearish) car parks. From here there are only two ways to reach the bottom of the majestic Briksdalsreen, still hidden at this point: by foot up a steepish path – allow 20 minutes for your first sight of the glacier (conveniently at a covered picnic site, ideal for us in pouring rain), and then a further 20 minutes to the hike's end; or in a two-wheeled cart drawn by a sturdy, corn-coloured *stolkjerre* (fjord horse), many of which you will have spotted in the valley below Briksdal.



Briksdalsreen

Whatever the means of transport the glacier's size is awesome: from the Jostedalbreen the Briksdal glacier falls 4,500ft in altitude and, this is a welcome surprise, over the last 50 years has been increasing in size!

The afternoon ended, again in monsoon rain, with our return to Olden, then continuing via Leon, Stryn and Hornindal (this on road 60) to our overnight stay at Hellesylt. During the last 10 miles of the run our spirits rose substantially. Breaks in the clouds, and a stop at last to the incessant rain, opened up views of mountain tops, distant woods and, as we descended to the prettily-sited, bypassed Hellesylt, our first sight of the Sunnylvsfjorden.

Total distance driven today 155 miles.

Grand Hotel 6218 Hellesylt (00 47 70 26 51 00 – fax 00 47 70 26 52 22 – www.grandhotel-hellesylt.no – email: grandhotel.hellesylt@c21.net). What an absolute delight this super hotel turned out to be. Over 130-years-old the homely wooden structure is not the 'Grand' you may assume it is. Yes, the interior of the main building is maintained in its original 19C style; but the bedrooms are in an ugly single-level annexe on the very edge of the fjord. Ugly duckling perhaps but much the most comfortable bedrooms on our trip; you could fish from the open French window! But the biggest bonus was the talented cooking of the young Danish chef, Martin Anderson. Beautifully done, both at dinner and breakfast. This hotel is where we would happily return! Bed and breakfast: 660NOK for two. Dinner: from an à la carte menu, for two, with wine 582NOK. 1,242NOK in total. Cards: MC, Visa. Closed: October-April (check).

Alternative for a further one or two day stay at Hellesylt.

We would willingly return again and we would spend at least two days here for the two ideas which follow (gleaned from literature and confirmed by the English-speaking staff at the Grand as two 'musts').

First, spend a day exploring the Norangsdalen, the valley connecting route 60, just south of Hellesylt, to Oye and Leknes, both on road 655 and beside the Hjørundfjorden. Initially, on leaving route 60, the 'canyon', a more apt name, is lined on both sides with 5,600ft-high 'real' mountains; the fjord is reckoned to be one of the best in the area; and there's plenty of good walking and serious climbing which rewards climbers with magnificent views.

Second, if you stay another day, explore the northern half of what's called 'The Golden Route'. (You'll drive the southern section tomorrow.) From Hellesylt use the new 'shelf' road 60 up to Stranda. Cross the fjord to Liabygda and then head east to Valldal, a green pastoral valley, and continue to the Trollstigveien (the 'Troll's Path') – 11 hairpin bends rising to a summit of 2,781ft in a barren landscape with some of Norway's finest mountains to both sides. Exceptional views at the start of the northern descent.